Suffering in sport: why people willingly embrace negative emotional experiences

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The way our team plays is beside the point for most of us, just as winning cups and championships is beside the point. Few of us have chosen our clubs, they have simply been presented to us; and so as they slip from the Second Division to the Third, or sell their best players, or buy players who you know can't play, or bash the ball for the seven hundredth time towards a nine foot centre-forward, we simply curse, go home, worry for a fortnight and then come back to suffer all over again.
Fever Pitch, Nick Hornby

Nearly everyone agrees that physical pain is bad. Indeed, if anything merits the status of a platitude in our everyday thinking about value, the idea that pain is bad surely does. Equally, it seems clearly true that emotional suffering – despair, loneliness, grief, disappointment, guilt, shame, lovesickness, and the like – are all bad as well. We are strongly inclined to pity and feel sorry for those who suffer emotionally in these ways; we are motivated, at least some of the time, to do what we can to alleviate their suffering. Given this, it might seem curious that pain and suffering are so integral to sport – whether one is a participant or a spectator. There's nothing particularly puzzling about pain and suffering that is *inadvertently* related to sport – as when an athlete injures her hamstring and has to miss her chance at Olympic glory, or when supporters face the misery of getting up at 6am because an away game has been scheduled to start at noon. But there does seem to be something curious about the extent to which pain and suffering are voluntarily embraced by participants and spectators, as the quotation from Nick Hornby aptly illustrates. Why do people willingly engage in something that brings about so much suffering? In this paper I'll attempt to answer this question.[1]

1. Preliminaries

Since this is a paper about suffering, we should start by saying something about what suffering is. We can begin by saying that it is a particular state – roughly, the state of being in pain, misery, distress, unhappiness. And although there are uses of the term 'suffering' to refer to damage or deterioration in general – as when we say that his reputation suffered after the critical mauling, or that the coastline is suffering from erosion – the term most naturally refers to the range of negative *experiences*. Suffering, on this view, is at heart an experiential state. It comes in a wide range of flavours. Thus we can distinguish physical suffering – which includes physical pain, but also highly unpleasant physical states of coldness, hunger, thirst, tiredness, nausea, irritation, etc. – and mental suffering, which includes, to quote David Hume, the emotional states of 'remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection, despair',[2] and a wider range of highly unpleasant mental states including frustration, depression, spiritual pain, loneliness, stress, anxiety, social rejection, boredom, and homesickness. What do all of these states have in common? One plausible answer is that they all have an element or component of *negative affect* – they all feel bad or unpleasant, in other words. This is not to say that there is some one distinctive feel or quality that all such experiences have in common. That would be an extremely implausible claim to make. There is no particular feeling that a paper cut, depression, physical disgust, and dread have in common. There is, indeed, no particular feeling that all forms of *physical* pain have in common: a migraine and a stubbed toe and a bee sting are all rather different from the phenomenological standpoint. Nevertheless, we can still maintain that these states all feel unpleasant – in very different ways – and that when such states are of a

suitably high intensity, or are such that we strongly desire them to stop, then we suffer from them. That, very briefly, is what suffering is.[3]

What then of the claim that suffering is integral to sport? Clearly the negative emotion of disappointment figures prominently in the life of most if not all sports fans; but other emotions are prominent as well. Prior to disappointment there is often excitement and expectation, but equally common – indeed probably more so, in the lives of dedicated fans – is the emotion of anxiety. Anger is a central part of the match-going experience for many spectators – football fans in the UK often spend a good proportion of their match-day experience in some form of rage or funk, whether directed towards their own team – and its badly-performing and overpaid players, inept management, and incompetent board – or the opposition players and fans. Boredom is often a central part of the sports' fans life, as well as more refined negative emotions: a sense of helplessness and lack of meaning, feelings of listlessness and ennui, and so on. Forms of suffering are clearly central to sporting activity and participation as well. Here too the pains and suffering associated with injury and failure and disappointment loom large, the despair at missing out on the team or the race, the sense of futility when one loses yet again, the anger and frustration that is part and parcel of most rounds of golf.

But there is another sense in which pain and suffering are bound up with participation in sports and more broadly active past-times. Consider the following actitivies: rugby, endurance running, boxing, mountain biking, martial arts, track cycling, ice hockey, lacrosse, wrestling, Australian Rules Football. What is striking about these sports and activities is that participants actively and voluntarily embrace the physical pain and emotional suffering that are usually at the heart of them. Think, if you want further illustrations, of the increasing popularity of endurance events like Tough Mudder, 12 miles of 'extreme' obstacle courses designed by Special Forces soldiers, or

similar events called things like Spartan Race and Total Warrior. *The Independent* notes that as of 2012, the industry worldwide was worth around $250 million.[4] Or consider, to illustrate, the following from four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome:

> Your body is saying, this hurts, that hurts, slow down – you just have to go faster. I've always loved that feeling of my body being on the limit. Feeling empty, having no more to give but still pushing your body. (Fordyce 2017)

People who do Tough Mudder events, people like Froome and other Tour cyclists, rugby players and those who engage in MMA, welcome the pain and difficulty involved in their sports. If these things were easy, Froome and people like him simply wouldn't do it. But that is plausibly true of *all* of the above examples. It is the physical contact, the prospect and reality of pain and suffering, the adversity, the difficulty, the challenge, that motivates those who participate in these sports. So although a lot of suffering associated with participation in sports is inadvertent and involuntary – think again of the injured athlete, or the maltreated football fan – very much of this is suffering that is *wanted* by participants. Indeed, it's not just in sports that we find this voluntary embracing of suffering; think of how central difficulty and adversity is to mountain climbing, doing philosophy, playing chess, making art, creative writing, learning to play a musical instrument, caving, renovating a house, body building, religious devotion, exploring, game playing. Mountain climbers are not satisfied with gentle walks; explorers push themselves to extremes; musicians take on difficult and challenging pieces; game players aim at overcoming obstacles and exacting tests;[5] the religious devotee wants a life of sacrifice, rather than a life of comfort and ease. Here too suffering is a condition on the value of activity. It is part of what the participant *wants*.[6]

How might we explain this relation between suffering and sport, a relation where the former isn't a merely unwanted or inadvertent accompaniment to the latter? In the next section I'll examine the idea that suffering is desired for certain instrumental reasons. On this view, suffering is wanted because it builds physical and psychological strength, or because it promises to enhance enjoyment and pleasure.[7] I'll argue that appealing to these values provides a good explanation of *some* cases, but there are other cases where this kind of explanation seems implausible. In §3, I'll argue for a different account. On the view to be developed there, suffering in sport sometimes can play an important communicative role. In particular, it can signal to others that one possesses certain virtues, and as a result enhance one's self-esteem and social standing. This suggests an *evolutionary* account of the pursuit of suffering: desires and motivations to engage in arduous and difficult activities (like the sports mentioned above) convey an adaptive advantage on those who possess them, and as a result have undergone positive selection.[8]

2. The instrumental value of suffering in sport

One response to our question is to maintain that suffering has *instrumental* value for participants and spectators. One form that this takes is in the provision of strength, since by suffering physically, our bodies can grow stronger. This is the principle behind muscle growth, which involves the damage and subsequent repair and strengthening of muscle fibres. Similarly, vaccination involves exposure to disease and temporary weakness, so that one becomes strong enough to resist it and healthier as a result. And the idea has obvious application when it comes to sporting participation. Athletes willingly embrace the pain and suffering of physical exercise in order to build muscles,

stamina, and endurance. Overcoming physical adversity has clear psychological benefits as well: one learns how to persevere, develops the psychological strength and fortitude to keep going when things are tough, becomes the kind of character that welcomes and embraces difficulties and challenges. Suffering has instrumental value from an epistemological standpoint too: through suffering, athletes can come to know the limits of their bodies; novice boxers learn that being hit doesn't hurt as much as they feared it would; teams learn about, and from, disappointment and failure. As Sir Alex Ferguson, former Manchester United manager, put things: 'You learn more from defeats than you do from victories.' (It was no surprise to those who had followed Ferguson's managerial career that after United lost the Premier League title on goal difference to Manchester City in 2012, they won the 2013 title by 11 points.)[9]

When it comes to spectators and fans, suffering can also have clear instrumental value. Perhaps the main way in which this can happen is by enabling us to fully *appreciate* sporting values and achievements. One important set of such values are those that *contrast* with suffering. It might, for instance, be true that that we can only really understand or grasp the value of something if we have experience of its opposite: so we might only fully appreciate the goodness of a warm house and a full stomach if we have been cold, homeless, and hungry; we only fully appreciate love and companionship after we have experienced heartbreak and loneliness. The claim that suffering is necessary for such appreciation and understanding can itself be understood in two ways. On one reading, the claim is that the experience of certain pleasures *requires* the experience of suffering, since the pleasure itself can be defined simply in terms of *relief from* suffering. Think, for instance, of the relief one gets when one no longer suffers toothache, or when a neighbour's loud music finally stops, or when one scratches that really irritating itch. As the psychologists Siri Leknes and Brock Bastian note: 'The

contrast afforded by pain and other aversive experiences is closely associated with the subjective experience of relief'.[10] And: 'pain affords an effective contrast to many non-painful experiences, which can appear relatively pleasant or rewarding if they occur after the pain has ended. For instance, fruit flies approached odours associated with pain offset even when these odours were initially mildly aversive … Similar effects have been observed in rats … and humans'.[11] Some of these humans will be sports fans. Think, for instance, of the relief that Cleveland Browns fans felt recently after their team won for the first time in 635 days, after having endured two seasons of misery, frustration, disappointment, and humiliation.

On a second reading, the claim is that a prior experience of suffering *intensifies* our experience of some value, so that the latter is experienced as more pleasant as a result. The pleasure of cold beer is heightened and intensified if one is thirsty and overheated on a blistering day. Here are Leknes and Bastian again: 'Although introspection suggests to many people that relief and pleasure are easily dissociated, most primary rewards are intensified by relief. Food and drink taste better when providing relief from hunger or thirst … And where would the pleasure in going to bed at night be if we were not so tired, our muscles weary and aching?'[12] This too has obvious parallels for sporting fans. The pleasure that Boston Red Sox fans experienced when their team won the baseball World Series in 2004 was surely intensified by the fact that the team hadn't won it since 1918; many Red Sox fans had known nothing but despair and disappointment for their lifetime following the team. (The run of near-misses in that time is so notable that some thought, not entirely in jest, that the club was 'cursed' after trading Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees in 1919.) Here too suffering would seem to have clear instrumental value for spectators and fans.

However, these (and other) forms of instrumental goodness do not exhaust the value that suffering can have for players and spectators of sport. This is because many of the instances described in the previous section – where people voluntarily engage in sporting activities that involve pain and suffering – are not cases where people do so to make themselves stronger or fitter, or because their pleasure will thereby be intensified or enhanced. It is implausible to suppose that endurance runners and boxers and golfers and cyclists and hockey players embrace challenges and difficulties, and the pain and suffering that are part and parcel of these, *only because* these are a way to get fitter and stronger, physically and psychologically. Nor is it the case that those who engage in these sporting activities always do so because of the pleasures of relief when the suffering stops, or because the suffering promises to make the good times even better. While there is such a thing as runner's high, and intense pleasure in hitting a five-iron perfectly after a run of poor shots, endurance runners and golfers don't embrace challenge and difficulty for these hedonistic reasons alone either. This is because runners and golfers would still embrace difficulty and suffering even if it *didn't* have these hedonistic benefits. In other words: it is not the case that participants only embrace pain and suffering because this will improve their skills and performance, and/or because it promises to make the good times better – although it is doubtless true that pain suffering will have these positive effects in many cases. Instead, those who play and participate in sports often seem to regard suffering as a *condition* on the value of what they do; they think that suffering partly defines the value of their activity, in much the same way that difficulty is a condition on the attraction of philosophical puzzles or video games, and sacrifice a condition on the worth of religious devotion and musical performance. These attitudes don't seem to be explicable in terms of obvious instrumental benefits like increased strength or intensified pleasure.

A similar point can be made about the motivations of fans and spectators. Football supporters, say, clearly put up with all kinds of pain and suffering – related to the weather, cost of tickets, poor transport, terrible grounds, risible treatment by authorities, the contempt of other fans, the indifference of their own players, etc. – for the sake of their team. They also doubtless sometimes think that bad times enhance the good in the ways explained earlier. But these are not the only motivations that fans have to endure and embrace suffering. Instead, suffering is sometimes viewed as part of what it is *to be* a fan. Here again suffering is embraced as a condition on the value of being a supporter. If things were too easy, comfortable, organized, and fun; if one's team were too successful, the opposing fans too respectful, the media and authorities too supportive; then I suspect that many supporters would lose interest in their team. It's not that pain and suffering are therefore the price one pays for being a fan, or that they make the occasional good times even better – although again, these things are clearly true a lot of the time. Instead, pain and suffering are part of what being a fan or supporter is all about. In the following section I'll try to make sense of these cases where participants and fans willingly embrace pain and suffering.

3. Suffering and the communication of virtue

I said above that people often pursue activities that involve pain and suffering because they view this as a condition on the worth of those activities. This isn't aberrant or masochistic behaviour, however. Instead, there are good reasons for such pursuit, which has considerable value both in terms of the happiness of the agent in question, and for the well-being of others. This is because (successfully) engaging in difficult and arduous activity plays a *communicative* role: in particular, it communicates to others

than one possesses certain virtues, leading to enhanced self-esteem and the opportunity for valuable co-operation. Since both of these have adaptive value, then we can tell a plausible evolutionary story of the intentional pursuit of suffering in sport, grounded in its communicative value and the enhanced benefits for the individual that accrue as a result of this. In a sense, the resulting picture still appeals to the instrumental or extrinsic benefits of such pursuit; but it isn't an explanation that appeals in the main to an *individual's* reasons or motives for doing what they do. So it is no part of the story that participants and fans need to consciously think in terms of the communicative value of their own suffering, and the enhanced self-esteem that this might bring – although it is clearly possible that some participants and fans do have such value in mind. Nevertheless, the evolutionary story strikes me as a plausible explanation of our willingness to embrace and welcome suffering, whether in sport or elsewhere, since it posits that this willingness has been selected for. Or so, at least, I'll argue.

To see the communicative value that suffering can have, we need to look more closely at a *positive* emotion which is related to sporting success and achievement, namely pride. The emotion of pride can be characterized in terms of a certain 'appraisal structure': roughly, it involves an appraisal or assessment of an object or event as (i) valuable, and (ii) as related in some way to oneself. Gabriele Taylor has a more precise definition of the emotion in her 1985 book *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*.[13] She writes:

> [A] person who experiences pride believes that she stands in the relation of belonging to some object (person, deed, state) which she thinks desirable in some respect … It is because (in her view) this relation holds between her and the desirable object that she believes her worth to be increased, in the relevant respect. This belief is constitutive of the feeling of pride. (Taylor 1985: 41)

On Taylor's view, we feel pride in some object or event that we think is valuable or desirable, and that stands in some relation of 'belonging' to us. Taylor continues: 'It is in

virtue of belonging to the same family, the same country or institution that people are proud of their ancestors, countrymen, or colleagues' (ibid). But the proud person must also regard her standing in this relation as something that is itself valuable, as reflecting well on her, and as a source of self-worth or self-esteem. So we are not necessarily proud when we are related to something that *is* valuable; I might not be proud of my family's fancy yacht, for example, because I think this a source of shame, given the levels of poverty in the world. Instead, I must take the relation to be one that enhances my worth and social standing. Pride is thus a positive emotion that involves a particular appraisal of the relationship between the proud person, and some object or event that they take to enhance their standing and esteem.

This is what pride is. But what does pride do? What is its function or purpose? To answer these questions, I want to consider an evolutionary account of pride that has emerged from recent work in social psychology, which stresses its communicative value. This is the account of pride developed in a paper from 2010 by Jessica Tracy, Azim Shariff, and Joey Cheng.[14] On their account, 'pride is a psychologically important and evolutionarily adaptive emotion' that has 'evolved to serve specifically social functions' (164). Evidence for this view comes from work on the facial expression of pride, and in particular from the fact that 'its expression is displayed by individuals across cultures in the same contexts and situations' (168). Consider, in support, 'recent studies assessing behavioral responses to success at the Olympic and Paralympics Games, showing that sighted and blind athletes spontaneously display the pride expression in response to Olympic victory' (168). Since this cannot be learned behaviour, at least not in congenitally blind athletes, the expressions would seem to be biologically innate. Tracy et al. argue that expression of pride has evolved to serve a particular function that is related to the circumstances in which it occurs. These are

circumstances where the subject (or those close to her) has been successful, or has achieved something. The authors suggest that pride has evolved 'to serve the distal function of enhancing social status'. In particular, pride has evolved 'to help individuals transform culturally valued achievements into higher social status' (168). Feelings of pride, and their facial and bodily expression, therefore have the function of advertising and communicating one's achievements to others, and as a result of enhancing one's status and esteem. Feelings of pride do this in a number of ways, but two are of particular importance.

First, feelings of pride '[motivate] individuals to strive for achievements in socially valued domains' (168). For the subject, pride is usually experienced as a positive emotion or has positive valence, and it is plausible to explain positive valence in terms of pleasure. Thus joy, feelings of friendship and love, aesthetic appreciation, and pride are all positive emotions in virtue of being pleasurable experiences. Now pleasure is a positive reinforcer, and so pleasurable experiences typically motivate the subject to seek out more of that which generates pleasure. In the case of pride, we are taught – by parents, teachers, and peers – to feel pride in relation to certain socially valued objects and events. As a result, we are taught to feel good about ourselves when we have a positive relation towards such goods. So as children we are praised, and feel good about ourselves, when we excel in school, show kindness to others, respect our teachers, stand up to bullies, do well in sport, and so on. As a result, a child will come to see herself as able, independent, talented, and strong, but also a valued member of the school, community, and country. Since pleasure is reinforcing, the child will 'strive to develop an identity that coheres with social norms' (168), and will as a result be motivated more strongly to behave in ways which promote such norms and identities. Insofar as she is successful, she will garner further praise and esteem from others, and be 'rewarded

with social approval, acceptance, and increased social status, all of which promote adaptive fitness' (168). On this view, therefore, pride is a force that motivates the pursuit of socially approved goods. Not only will these goods typically benefit the person directly – as when she passes the exam or is promoted at work – but also benefit her indirectly, *via* reputational rewards for success and achievement in these areas.

Second, the facial and bodily expression of pride can enhance our reputation and social status. Tracy et al. note that pride enhances status through 'its universally recognized nonverbal expression, which may function to inform observers (other social group members) of the proud individual's achievement, indicating that he/she deserves higher status' (169). The authors support this with their own research: 'Using the Implicit Association Test … we found that the pride expression is rapidly and automatically perceived as a signal of high status' (ibid). Such signals can be of value to the subject displaying pride, and thus who is perceived to be of high status as a result, since they then 'receive increased resources, attention, and other status-related benefits' (ibid). Such signalling and display can also benefit *observers*, and in two ways.

First, those who observe the subject as having higher status can then 'more effectively navigate the status hierarchy by showing appropriate deference, knowing whom to emulate, forming productive alliances, and facilitating their own status jockeying' (169–170). Second, such signals and displays can communicate that the subject possesses certain positive qualities or virtues, knowledge of which can benefit the group as a whole. (As with other emotional expressions, this isn't always the case. There is room for deception and misinterpretation here, as elsewhere.) We have already seen the close connection between pride and achievement: pride is properly felt with respect to valuable objects or events that in some sense belong to the subject. Typically, they are things that the subject is responsible for, and result from the subject's agency.

(This is why we can distinguish genuine cases of pride, from cases where someone is merely 'basking in reflected glory', where the object of this latter attitude lacks the right kind of relationship and responsibility.) But knowledge that someone is responsible for some achievement or accomplishment is equally knowledge that they possess the relevant skills and virtues required to bring that thing about. Many if not most socially valued goods require the development and exercise of skills and qualities such as courage, talent, hard work, dexterity, and fortitude. As a result, facial and bodily expressions of pride communicate that a person possesses these valuable features and qualities, and stands to be of considerable benefit to particular others – who can engage in mutually beneficial cooperative activity with the virtuous person – and to the group as a whole. Knowing who is skilled and virtuous has significant value, especially in small-scale groups, since it can ground efficient utilization of such things, and effective decision-making about who ought to be assigned or asked to perform which tasks.

This evolutionary account of the way in which emotions such as pride facilitate higher social standing, and at the same time communicate information that can be of great value to the group, can in my view help us to explain why both participants and supporters regard pain and suffering as a condition on the value of what they do. For the successful pursuit of difficult and arduous activities can signal to observers that one possesses a range of important virtues, which can enhance self-esteem, social standing, and facilitate co-operative behaviour. Such traits can therefore have adaptive value.

Consider first participation in difficult or arduous sports: boxing and endurance cycling and rugby and mixed martial arts and the like. A plausible (evolutionary) explanation of such activity mirrors the one we told for pride. Suppose that something strikes us as difficult or challenging or arduous – the endurance race, the MMA competition – and we are directly motivated by the aim of rising to the challenge. An

explanation of how we stand to benefit from achieving the relevant goal appeals to the reputational rewards involved. For given that social norms reward achievement, and given that what counts as achievement typically tracks what is difficult and challenging, and given that what is difficult and challenging typically requires the exercise of virtues such as strength, fortitude, courage, patience, and perseverance, it is not surprising that some people will be strongly motivated to engage in difficult and challenging activities in general, and hence motivated to engage in these particular instances of the difficult and the challenging. For participation in, and especially success in, activities *like these* both brings about socially-valued goods, and advertises to others that one possesses valued qualities and traits. In the case of difficult or challenging sports, physical and psychological strength and fortitude will be prominent. These will in turn garner praise and esteem from others, and enhance one's social standing, which – as Tracy and colleagues argue – promotes adaptive fitness. Participation in, and especially success in, sports that require one to face up to and overcome suffering and adversity therefore has adaptive value, both in terms of the value of what is achieved, but also in terms of enhanced reputation and improved social status. This provides us with a neat explanation as to why for some people, difficult and adversity – and the pain and suffering that are at the heart of these – are a condition on the value of sporting activity.[15]

Participation in such sports promises to have social benefits as well, which can further redound on participants. Once again, social knowledge of who has a particular range of virtues – such as strength, courage, patience, and perseverance – is likely to benefit the group as a whole. Such people can be relied upon to perform important group-related tasks that call for the exercise of these virtues. Knowing who is patient increases the chances of hiring a good teacher or a counsellor or a negotiator; knowing

who is courageous puts us in a better position to elect leaders and managers who won't crumble under pressure. By the same token, knowledge that certain people participate and excel in arduous and testing sports – and hence knowledge of who is strong, and who will persevere in the face of adversity – can be of significant practical value to the group in general. For such people are more likely to be reliable in a great variety of difficult and challenging circumstances, and to elicit admiration and trust from others. Knowing who we can rely upon, who we can trust, is of significant value for the group as a whole; and insofar as the group as whole is better off as a result of knowledge of virtue, then the virtuous person themselves is likely to be better off as well. (Of course, sporting courage, perseverance, and fortitude are not always indicative of reliability and trustworthiness – as Lance Armstrong amply illustrates. Still, it's not implausible to think that *in general* it's good to know who is strong and courageous and patient.)

What, though, of the fact that pain and suffering are also often central to the life of the sports fan or supporter, and not simply because this is the price that one must unwillingly pay to be a fan, nor because experiencing suffering makes the occasional joys of victory so much sweeter. Can we explain this fact on similar lines?

I think that we can. At the end of the previous section I said that pain and suffering are part of what it is to be a fan. This was meant to capture the idea that it's not just participants in arduous or challenging sports that have pain and suffering as a condition on the value of what they do. But the claim that pain and suffering are part of what it is to be a fan isn't quite right, however. For there are, of course, fair-weather fans: the glory-hunters, the johnny-come-latelys, who think of sport as a kind of entertainment, who are attracted to the pleasures and excitement of investing themselves in some team or club or sporting personality, but who are quick to jettison the object of their fleeting affection when things go awry. (The *Fast Show*'s Roger Nouveau is a fine illustration of

the type, being an Arsenal fan who previously supported Manchester United, and then before that Blackburn Rovers…) It is therefore more accurate to say that pain and suffering are part of what it is to be a *loyal, true, authentic, proper* fan. It is not that pain and suffering are the objects or aims of fans or supporters; instead, such things are once again a condition of support for one's team or club, something without which one's attachment lacks the right kind of authenticity and value.

Given this, we can tell a similar story about why pain and suffering are bound up in the lives of *genuine* fans and supporters. For by suffering for one's team, one thereby communicates that one has a range of important virtues, where such communication bolsters one's social standing and self-esteem, and at the same time has benefits for the group as a whole. Perhaps the most important virtue that embracing suffering for the sake of one's team demonstrates is *loyalty*: one sticks with the team through thick and (many more times) thin, because that is what a genuine supporter does. And the more loyal a fan is perceived to be – the more he or she sacrifices for the sake of the team – the higher their social standing in the set of supporters, and the greater the attendant benefits of this standing, including increased resources and attention. By the same token, other supporters benefit from the communication of virtues of loyalty and authenticity that suffering for a team provides, since they can then 'more effectively navigate the status hierarchy by showing appropriate deference, knowing whom to emulate, forming productive alliances, and facilitating their own status jockeying' (Tracy et al., 169-70). Embracing and expressing suffering for the sake of one's team thus promises to benefit other supporters as well – who in turn might reciprocate by bestowing further esteem and benefits on those who are loyal and authentic. So we can tell a similar story as to why fans and supporters willingly embrace pain and suffering as a condition on the worth of what they do.

At this point someone might object that the idea of a *proper fan* is a very recent phenomenon, and so there is reason to be sceptical about any claims of adaptive value here. But as with the case of participation in sports – many of which are, like MMA and endurance cycling, also very new – this misses the point. For the idea that through suffering we can communicate loyalty and trustworthiness and other virtues to some group is not recent at all, and suffering for the sake of one's team is simply a modern instance of this general phenomenon. Consider, to support, the phenomenon of initiation rites and ceremonies, which are found in very many cultures across very many historical periods. One of the central points of such rites and ceremonies is to test the initiands, usually in a way that involves the imposition of suffering, in the form of physical pain, but also psychological trials and humiliations. The initiand's acceptance of and endurance of suffering communicates to the group that they have a range of important virtues – courage, fortitude, perseverance, but also loyalty, commitment, and humility.[16] Those who endure and successfully pass the test gain significant rewards – in terms of enhanced self-esteem, social standing, and the like. At the same time, the group as a whole benefits, through knowing that the initiand has virtues which can be put to good use, but also through knowing that the initiands is loyal to and committed to the group as a whole. Initiation rites and ceremonies therefore bolster group identify and solidarity. It seems to me that suffering for the sake of one's team is simply a modern instance of this phenomenon, whereby one suffers for the sake of some group or collective and in so doing communicates to others that one has certain virtues. Such communication will, in turn, stand to benefit both the individual who suffers, and her collective. She will enjoy enhanced social standing and esteem; they will know that she is a true fan, and someone whose presence bolsters group identity and solidarity. Although the idea of a proper fan is a modern phenomenon, it fits a practice of

communicating virtue through enduring suffering that is long-standing and cross-cultural. Being motivated to endure suffering for the sake of one's membership in some group, and for the sake of the group itself, is something that might very well have adaptive value, and so an evolutionary account of this isn't implausible.

4. Conclusion

Why do people willingly participate in and watch sports that bring pain and suffering? Sometimes suffering is an unwelcome price to pay for being a player or a fan. Sometimes suffering has important instrumental values – it promotes strength, it enhances pleasure. But I've argued that there is another explanation of why we are motivated to embrace pain and suffering in sport: by doing so, we communicate our virtue to others, which has significant adaptive value. Those who suffer for the sake of their sport or for their team can therefore enjoy enhanced self-esteem and social standing. It might not seem like this most of the time, but perhaps this is one of the main reasons that we come back to suffer again and again.

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Notes

[1] The fact that people willingly embrace pain and suffering in sport is also the topic of an excellent paper by Jeffrey Fry (Fry 2006). Some of Fry's suggested explanations will be discussed later, although space prevents me from considering all of the interesting things he says in his paper.
[2] Hume, D. (1779), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part 10, p. 42 in the version by Jonathan Bennett presented at www.earlymoderntexts.com.
[3] For much more detail on this, see my book *Suffering and Virtue* (2018), Oxford University Press, especially Ch. 1.
[4] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/tough-mudder-the-obstacle-courses-for-adults-that-are-now-worth-250m-8603427.html
[5] Some hold that this is part of the definition of game playing. Thus Bernard Suits write: "Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." In Suits, B. (2005), *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, p. 55. Thanks to Nathan Wildman for the suggestion and the reference.
[6] To say that suffering is a condition on the value of the activity for a subject is compatible with the activity having intrinsic and independent value. My thought is that without suffering, the activity wouldn't have (as much) value *for* the subject herself. It is, after all, perfectly possible for us to recognize that something is valuable – such as free jazz or gardening or ballroom dancing – without such things being (of much) value to us, since we don't care about or for such things. On my view, suffering plays the same role as a condition of value as caring does.
[7] These are not the only possibilities. Fry notes (2006, p. 251), drawing from parallels with religious experience, that athletes sometimes embrace pain and suffering because it promises to enhance personal well-being and be a part of 'soul making'. Space prohibits me from addressing these very interesting options. But even if such explanations capture some cases, the idea that embracing pain and suffering has significant communicative value arguably captures more, and so constitues an explanation that has wider scope. Or so, at least, I'm inclined to think.
[8] A weaker claim is that such advantages are mere side effects of something that does have adaptive value. This is not the time to engage in an argument for the stronger claim, and so I'm happy to admit that the evoluationary account is at this stage simply a suggestion. Thanks to a referee for this paper for pushing me to clarify this.
[9] See also Fry (2006), p. 251, who quotes Lance Armstrong on the epistemic and revelatory value of suffering.
[10] Leknes S. & Bastian, B. (2014), 'The Benefits of Pain', *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 5, p. 65.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Taylor, G. (1985), *Price, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, New York: Oxford University Press.
[14] Tracy, J., Shariff, A. & Cheng, J. (2010), 'A Naturalist's View of Pride', *Emotion Review 2*(*2*): 163–177.
[15] I'm not claiming, of course, that participation in specific sporting activities like endurance cycling and MMA has been selected for. Instead, the claim is that a motivation to engage in painful and arduous activity has significant adaptive value, and that has plausibly been selected for. Endurance cycling and MMA are very recent *forms* of painful and arduous activity, and so that's why the evolutionary story is appropriate here.
[16] For a fascinating take on such ceremonies, see Jean La Fontaine's *Initiation*, Penguin Books, 1985.

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